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AUTHOR Hickey, Mike E.
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ABSTRACT

In this age of declining enrollments, alternatives exist to boarding up schools that are no longer being fully utilized. This paper discusses such alternatives by describing the situation in a Minnesota school district. Of the four elementary school buildings closed in St. Louis Park in the past five years, one was sold to a developer, two are currently operating as community centers, and a fourth is being developed into a senior citizen center. The paper details the activities in each of the centers and then lists several funding approaches used by the district to make the centers self-supporting. The paper concludes that school officials should seek creative approaches to the utilization or disposal of closed school buildings. Otherwise, the buildings serve as painful reminders of educational and community decline. (Author/LD)

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CLOSED SCHOOLS--OPEN DOORS

Remarks by Dr. Mike Hickey to Clinic B-27,
Declining Enrollment:
When To Close Schools And How To Use Empty Space

It is an increasingly common sight today to be visiting a town and to see alongside the usual historical or civic monuments a monument of a different type: a closed, boarded-up school building. The shift in mentality of school boards and administrators from the problems of growth to those of decline has been difficult and traumatic. Unfortunately, far too many districts have seized upon the most obvious way of dealing with unneeded buildings and have boarded them up, where they sit as a monument to the toll of educational decline in that community.

The St. Louis Park School District, a 7,000 student district on the immediate western edge of Minneapolis, has followed a typical pattern of decline, dropping from a high of more than 11,000 students in the mid 1960's to its current population of 7,000. Strangely enough, the community population of nearly 50,000 has not declined. But the population that remains there has changed significantly, with more than 80% of the households having no children in the public school system. Nevertheless, the community, which has always placed a high value on education, continues that commitment even through the pattern of decline.

The school system has been responsive to the enrollment drop by closing four elementary schools since 1974-75, with two more elementaries and one junior high projected for closure at the end of 1979-80, at which time it is anticipated the District's student population will begin leveling off at the 5,000 student level. The decision to close a school building stems from two interrelated factors:

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the necessity of reducing budgets as revenues decline due to enrollment loss; and the necessity to utilize existing facilities in an effective and efficient manner. Current figures in St. Louis Park indicate that the expected saving from the closing of an elementary building is about $180,000, while the saving from the closure of a junior high building would amount to between $350,000 and $400,000.

One other element which is important to establish, by way of background for these comments, is the fact that St. Louis Park has an extensive community education program, one that is generally regarded as a national model, even though it has only been in existence about seven years. The thrust of this program is providing literally "cradle to grave" learning opportunities for all segments of St. Louis Park's citizens, as well as many others who come into the community to participate in these programs. It is important to note that, while Community Education is the pupular name for this program, the legal name of the program is Community Services, a broader concept which will become clearer as I elaborate on our utilization of the facilities that have been closed.

Community Centers

Of the four elementary buildings closed in the past five years, one, which was adjacent to a small shopping center, was sold immediately upon closure to a developer and was subsequently torn down to make way for a large retail store. Of the remaining three, two are currently operating as community centers, while the third is undergoing major remodeling in a project funded largely by the City of St. Louis Park to develop a senior citizen center on the site. A fundamental tenet which has led the St. Louis Park District in this direction is that buildings and property purchased with public funds should be retained as long as possible for the public's use. In this age of real property inflation, it is becoming increasingly difficult and economically prohibitive to obtain new public lands. In many communities, school sites are choice pieces of property which make them extremely valuable to the community as a whole. While in some cases the sale of a piece of

school property to a private developer may be the best alternative, it should be one that is settled upon only after careful consideration of the long term needs of the community and the school district which might justify maintaining unneeded school facilities for alternative uses.

I would next like to briefly describe the three community centers to show the variety of needs that are being served within a relatively compact and not overly large suburban community.

Eliot Center for Music and Arts - While this center has not yet completely lived up to the vision that its title might indicate, the thrust is clearly there to develop the Eliot Community Center as one specializing in music and arts. Ballet studios, artists' studios, a gallery and music areas have yet to be developed as specialized spaces within the center. Nevertheless, these activities now exist in regular classroom spaces and the direction for Eliot's future program seems clearly established. The center operates from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Monday and Friday and from 6:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Literally hundreds of community groups have used the facilities for meetings and activities of one kind or another since its opening as a community center in the fall of 1977. There are six regular tenants of the building who pay rent amounting to approximately $1,500 per month. These tenants include a day care center, a United Way agency, two state special education consultants, etc. In addition, the District's music center and elementary arts center occupy office and storage space in the building, the feeling being that this was appropriate given the intended development of the center in the future. Also, a large resource center for gifted and talented students is housed in the building and receives frequent use by District staff. There is a cooperative pre-school program, a volunteer coordinator, an early childhood and family education program.

But the thrust is clearly in the direction of arts and music activity, with both daytime and evening adult classes in areas such as: watercolor, dance, stained glass, pottery, silkscreen, portrait painting, oil painting, drawing, painters' studio, potters' studio, voice, piano, calligraphy, guitar. These classes are taught by professional artists who have experience and training in the various fields. In addition, there are classes for elementary age children in the after school or early evening hours in art related areas such as: ballet, creative drama, painting, drawing, tap dance, acting. In the fall quarter of 1978 alone, 953 people took part in 34 community education classes at Eliot for a total of over 9,400 participation hours.

Brookside Community Center: Brookside Center, in a somewhat less desirable geographic location than Eliot, nevertheless has six rent paying tenants for a total of about $2,000 a month. Brookside has emphasized the community service aspect in its programming and consequently many of the services available there occupy space free of charge, or at only a token rent. These community services include the Youth Outreach program, the St. Louis Park Emergency Program, an emergency Clothes Closet, the transportation service of the Minneapolis Area American Red Corss, the County Human Services Planning Board, a senior citizen chemical dependency outreach worker and counselors, and a preschool coperative for 30 children, as well as a Montessori preschool and kindergarten center.

Educational and recreational activities at Brookside are planned around family involvement as well as individual and group community education activities. In the past quarter, 730 people took part in 20 community education classes. The building is open two days a week from 6:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. the other days. Again, as at Eliot, a large variety of community groups have used Brookside facilities since its opening.

Lenox Senior Center: The Lenox project is a most ambitious one, since it will eventually involve nearly one half million dollars in remodeling to convert an old school building into an exciting and vibrant senior citizen center/community center. At the present time, the entire second floor of the building is being rented to four tenants. The rental rate from these four is in excess of $3,000 per month. The lower two levels are currently being remodeled to create a senior center that will be occupied and fully programed beginning in the fall of 1979. The District has nearly 2,000 senior citizens enrolled in its senior program. Because of the inversion of the population pyramid in St. Louis Park, it is estimated that there are nearly 8,000 senior citizens in the community, many of whom have little or nothing to do for activities, education, or socialization. The School District, unable to spare its limited funds for pursuit of an undertaking of this scope, entered into a joint powers agreement with the City of St. Louis Park where the City has been able thus far to obtain nearly $300,000 in categorical funds from sources unavailable to the School District. These funds have addressed the development of this project according to certain priorities, the first of which was obviously making the building more accessible to the aged and handicapped. Because of the community center concept and at the urging of the Senior Citizen Advisory Board, the District is establishing two pre-school classrooms in the building which will begin operating in the fall of 1979. This will serve a crying need in the community for day care/pre-school facilities, and will provide an exciting opportunity for cross-age interaction between the seniors and the preschool children. Many of the seniors are lonely people who, if they have grandchildren, may only see them on rare occasions. This comingling of the ages promises to be one of the highlights of the Lenox program. It should be noted that the atmosphere of cooperation between the City and School District on the Lenox center is typical of the relationship that has existed for the past eight years. The

City has been an enthusiastic and supportive partner of the District's community service program.

Financial Aspects

Obviously, there are operating costs attendant to these centers which a District in a financially declining position cannot afford to maintain from the general fund. This has been a fundamental part of our position since the inception of this program: namely, that the operation of these centers must be self-supporting, at least after the initial year. The major operating costs of these centers are obviously personnel, maintenance, and utility costs. The District approaches the funding of these centers through a multi-faceted program including the following:

1. Leasing efforts

   The District has aggressively attempted to interest a variety of nonprofit groups in leasing space in these community centers. We developed an attractive brochure and disseminated it widely with the result that we now have people waiting to lease space in the centers when it becomes available.

2. District Community Services Levy

   By law, the State of Minnesota allows a school district to levy a $2.00 per person tax, the proceeds from which can only be used to support a community services program. In addition, if the District levies the full $2.00, the State matches with an additional 50¢ per head. This provides a major portion of the funding for programs.

3. Joint Funding

   The District has pursued successfully the concept of joint funding by the City of St. Louis Park for many aspects of our community services program. We feel this is appropriate, since these are services which the City would have to provide if the District were

not doing so. It is anticipated that for the 1979-80 school year, the level of funding from the City of St. Louis Park will be approximately $100,000, or about 45% of the District's total community services revenue. The other 55% is provided by the District.

4. Allocation of Costs for District Uses

It is too easy for districts to overlook the fact that if they occupy space in a community center type building that is intended to be self-supporting, some allowance should be made for rent that space might otherwise generate. The District takes this into consideration fully when looking at the "bottom line" for a community center to determine whether or not it is operating on its own.

5. Initial Seed Money

The District anticipates that to get a community center program off the ground it initially requires some seed money which often comes from the District's general fund. There appears to be no way to avoid that if you expect to get a successful program going. We justify this (for the first year of operation only) on the basis that once the center becomes self-supporting, it eliminates the drain that would exist on the District's general fund to keep the building in mothballs, maintain minimal temperature settings, and repair vandalism that inevitably occurs. This does not even make allowance for the negative cost of the blight that a closed, boarded up school in the neighborhood creates.

6. Program Fees

As far as the operation of the programs themselves, they are basically self-supporting, with fees charged for all participants. These fees may vary from a token to an actual cost basis depending on the

nature of the class or program. Some classes are very profitable, but all these do is serve to make it possible for the District to offer at a loss, if necessary, some classes that it deems important or essential. The intent of the program is to be self-sustaining, not profit making. It should be noted that enrollment in last year's community education programs exceeded 30,000 individuals.

In conclusion, I may have overwhelmed you with some of these facts and figures, particularly those of you who might be from a smaller town, from a district that does not have a community education program, or from a state where no state funding is provided to encourage such programs. That was not my intent. My main intent was to say that a school building no longer required for school use need not become a focal point of educational blight in your community. There are many alternative uses for school buildings if we school people would just shake ourselves out of the traditional mind set that says schools are good for only one purpose.

School closures are a part of reality for school boards and administrators today and for the foreseeable future. But a creative approach to their utilization or disposal can open many doors of opportunity for the school districts and communities. Empty schools serve only as a painful reminder of educational and community decline. The lesson is clear: public schools--whether open or closed--should always serve the public interest. By closing a school, it is possible to open doors of opportunity into the future for the community and the school system.